

Mark 3: 20-35

IN 1934 TWO HEAVYWEIGHTS TOOK A FEW INTENTIONAL SWINGS AT EACH OTHER---THINK PERHAPS OF MUHAMMAD ALI VS. GEORGE FOREMAN. THE OPPONENTS WERE NOT PROFESSIONAL BOXERS WITH GLOVES SPARRING IN A RING BUT TWO TESTY EUROPEAN THEOLOGIANS, KARL BARTH AND EMIL BRUNNER, WHO TRADED JABS OF THE PEN. AT STAKE WAS DETERMINING ONCE AND FOR ALL THE POINT OF CONTACT BETWEEN GOD AND HUMAN BEINGS.

EMIL BRUNNER BELIEVED THE POINT OF CONTACT WAS LOCATED *INSIDE OF US*, WHILE KARL BARTH SAW THE POINT OF CONTACT AS TRULY *BEYOND US*. TO GENERALIZE MANY PAGES OF ARGUMENT, BRUNNER BELIEVED THERE WERE ECHOES OF EDEN STILL INSIDE OUR HEART, SOUL, AND MIND WHILE BARTH STAUNCHLY ARGUED GOD WAS NOTHING LIKE US, BUT INSTEAD DISTANT AND ULTIMATELY "OTHER."

IN THE FOURTH CHAPTER OF 2 CORINTHIANS, PAUL SUGGESTS, AMIDST TRAVAILS OF LIFE AND MINISTRY, WE CAN TAKE COMFORT THAT A RESURRECTED CHRIST LIVES INSIDE OF US. LIKE BRUNNER, PAUL LOCATES THE POINT OF CONTACT BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANS IS AT FIRST INSIDE US RATHER THAN OUTSIDE OF US. PAUL WRITES, "EVEN THOUGH OUR OUTER NATURE IS WASTING AWAY, OUR INNER NATURE IS BEING RENEWED DAY BY DAY."

BEDE GRIFFITHS IS A BENEDICTINE MONK WHO IN HIS TRAVELS AROUND THE WORLD ASKED VARIOUS PEOPLE OF FAITH, "WHERE IS GOD?" HINDUS AND BUDDHISTS IN THE EAST, HE DISCOVERED, WOULD TYPICALLY POINT TO THEIR HEART WHILE JEWS, CHRISTIANS, AND MUSLIMS IN THE WEST WOULD POINT OUTSIDE OF THEMSELVES AND UP TO THE HEAVENS.

IF I ASKED YOU "WHERE IS GOD?" HOW WOULD YOU ANSWER? INSIDE YOURSELF OR OUTSIDE?

IT'S IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT PAUL'S DAY JOB WAS VERY LIKELY TENT MAKING. AND SO UNSURPRISINGLY IN 2 CORINTHIANS HE REACHES FOR A TENT METAPHOR WHEN DESCRIBING WHAT WAS GOING ON TO HIS PHYSICAL BODY. "MY OUTWARD TENT IS WASTING AWAY" PAUL WRITES, SEEMINGLY WITHOUT COMPLAINT. "THE FABRIC IS TORN, RAIN GETS IN, THE MORE VIBRANT COLOR OF THE ORIGINAL TENT FABRIC LONG AGO FADED AWAY TO NOW SOME DULL GRAY, PALE LOOKING THING. I'VE LOST HALF MY TENT PEGS AND TWO OF THE SUPPORTING CORD ROPES HAVE FRAYED TO ALMOST NOTHING. ONE STRONG GUST OF WIND COULD KNOCK THIS OLD TENT DOWN TO A FLATTENED MESS."

THIS SOUNDS LIKE THE RHETORIC OF A DEFEATED MAN DOESN'T IT?

BUT "DEFEAT" IS A FAR CRY FROM PAUL'S TONE HERE. SURE, IT IS AT LEAST AS BAD AS PAUL DESCRIBES IT HERE BUT YET HE IS ABLE TO DISMISS ALL THAT AS "A LIGHT AND MOMENTARY AFFLICTION." REALLY? SOUNDS MISERABLE TO ME. HOW CAN PAUL KEEP HIS CHIN UP, KEEP GOING, CARRY ON FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD WHEN HIS EARTHLY TENT IS IN UNDENIABLE TATTERS? BECAUSE THROUGH CHRIST JESUS HE KNOWS A LARGER TRUTH: THERE IS A DIVINE TENTMAKER WHO IS EVEN NOW DESIGNING AND FASHIONING SOMETHING QUITE WONDERFUL FOR US ALL. THIS EARTHLY TENT IS NOT THE END OF THE STORY. NOT BY A LONG SHOT.

I DON'T THINK PAUL WOULD WAVE OFF SOMEONE'S HARDSHIPS. BAD THINGS HAPPEN IN OUR LIVES AND THEY ARE NOT THE WAY IT IS SUPPOSED TO BE, THEY HURT, THEY WOUND AND THERE IS A WHOLE BIBLICAL TRADITION OF PRAYER DESIGNED TO DEAL WITH THAT FACT: LAMENT. SADNESS. SORROW. 52 YEARS AGO TODAY, JUNE 9TH, I REMEMBER VIVIDLY...DETAILS OF A ROUTINE 8-YEAR-OLD LIFE IN RAPID CITY ON THE DAY A WALL OF WATER SWEEPED THROUGH WEST RAPID KILLING 238.

TRAGEDY HAPPENS, STILL BY FAITH A WEIGHT OF GLORY EXISTS INSIDE EACH ONE OF US NOW AND WHILE THAT DOES NOT MEAN THE TATTERING OF OUR EARTHLY TENTS IS NO BIG DEAL, IT DOES MEAN THAT THIS IS NOT THE FINAL DEAL. FIXING OUR EYES ON ETERNAL THINGS OF CHRIST HELPS US TO NOT LOSE HEART, NOT ULTIMATELY, NOT FINALLY, NOT AS THE LAST WORD ON ANYONE'S LIFE.

WE ARE KEENLY AWARE AREN'T WE OF THE WASTING AWAY OF OUR EARTHLY TENTS? IT MAY NOT BE—AS IT WAS FOR PAUL—PRIMARILY DUE TO PERSECUTION. MORE LIKELY IT IS THE DIAGNOSIS WE LIVE WITH, OR THE REALIZATION WE'RE NOT AS QUICK TO RECALL THINGS LIKE WE USED TO. IT MAY BE AS SIMPLE AS THE EMOTIONAL WEAR AND TEAR OUR EARTHLY TENT HAS ENDURED OVER THE COURSE OF ITS LIFE.

PAUL'S POINT IS THAT AT SOME POINT WE WILL ALL DIE—THAT IN TIME EVERYTHING HUMAN WILL CRUMBLE AND PERISH, WHETHER IT IS A CITY, A HOME, A RELATIONSHIP, OR EVEN OUR OWN LIFE. IN THE FACE OF OUR DEATH, AND THE STRUGGLES OF LIFE, PAUL STEERS US TO THE HOPE FOUND IN ETERNAL THINGS.

LIKE AN INNER NATURE GROUNDED IN A RESURRECTED CHRIST, THERE ALSO EXISTS, SAYS PAUL, GOD OUTSIDE US. SO WE COULD SAY IF PAUL WAS ASKED "WHERE IS GOD," HE MIGHT HAVE POINTED AT FIRST TO HIS HEART, AND THEN WITH HIS OTHER HAND TO THE STARS ABOVE.

YOU DON'T NEED ME TO REMIND OR CONVINCING YOU THAT YOUR EARTHLY TENT IS WASTING AWAY IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER. BUT WHAT I AM CALLED TO REMIND YOU IS THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT THE WEIGHT OF GLORY THAT CANNOT BE DISLODGED FROM INSIDE THESE SAGGING OLD TENTS. THE GOOD NEWS THAT THERE IS A MASTER TENTMAKER WHO IS EVEN NOW SEWING AND STITCHING SOMETHING TOGETHER FOR EACH ONE OF US---SOMETHING QUITE EXTRAORDINARY.

WHEN OUR TENTS TEAR AND SAG AND ULTIMATELY ARE LAID FLAT BY A STORMY GUST OF WIND, THERE IS ANOTHER WORD TO BE SPOKEN. WE DO NOT LOSE HEART. NOT WHEN OUR CURRENT SITUATION APPEARS HOPELESS. NOT AT THE BEDSIDE OF A LOVED ONE, NOT A FUNERAL, NOT A SOLEMN LUMP-IN-YOUR-THROAT GRAVESIDE OF ASHES TO ASHES, DUST TO DUST. WE DO NOT LOSE HEART. OUR TROUBLES MAY NOT BE LIGHT OR MOMENTARY BUT IN THE FACE OF ALL ETERNITY, THEY ARE. THEY WILL GIVE WAY TO SOMETHING GLORIOUS.

JUST AS ELIJAH HEARD A STILL SMALL VOICE, AND MOSES CLIMBED A MOUNTAIN TO SEE GOD'S GLORY, WE CAN DISCOVER GOD'S PRESENCE ALL AROUND US—INSIDE AND OUT---IF WE HAVE THE EYES OF THE HEART TO SEE.

THERE IS AN OLD STORY ABOUT A DISCIPLE AND HIS TEACHER, A STORY PAUL MIGHT HAVE LIKED. "WHERE SHALL I FIND GOD?" A DISCIPLE ONCE ASKED. "HERE," THE TEACHER SAID. "THEN WHY

CAN'T I SEE GOD?" "BECAUSE YOU DO NOT LOOK." "BUT WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR?" THE DISCIPLE CONTINUED. "NOTHING. JUST LOOK," THE TEACHER SAID. "BUT AT WHAT?" "AT ANYTHING YOUR EYES ALIGHT UPON," THE TEACHER SAID. "BUT MUST I LOOK IN A SPECIAL KIND OF WAY?" "NO, THE ORDINARY WILL DO." "BUT DON'T I ALWAYS LOOK THE ORDINARY WAY?" "NO, YOU DON'T," THE TEACHER SAID. "BUT WHY EVER NOT?" THE DISCIPLE PRESSED. "BECAUSE TO LOOK, YOU MUST BE HERE. YOU'RE MOSTLY SOMEWHERE ELSE," THE TEACHER SAID.

GOD'S PRESENCE AND TRIUMPH IS BOTH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL—AS THE RESURRECTED CHRIST RENEWS US FROM THE INSIDE OUT, BUT ALSO AS GOD CONTINUES TO BIRTH IN OUR MIDST, AND BEFORE OUR VERY EYES, A NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH.

WE DO NOT LOSE HEART...OUR TROUBLES MAY NOT SEEM LIGHT OR EVEN MOMENTARY BUT REMEMBER IN THE FACE OF ALL ETERNITY, THEY ARE FOR THEY WILL GIVE WAY TO SOMETHING GLORIOUS. THIS IS THE GOSPEL OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. ALLELUIA AND AMEN.